

Christian Epic Literature

NICAN MOPOHUA

HERE IS RECOUNTED

(Nican Mopohua)

AND TOLD

IN

AN orderly fashion how by a great miracle

THE consummate virgin saint Mary,

MOTHER of God, our queen,

FIRST appeared at

TEPEYACAC, called

GUADALUPE.

First she revealed herself to a humble commoner named Juan Diego, and afterwards her precious image appeared in the presence of the first bishop, don fray Juan de Zumarraga. And [here are related] all the miracles she has worked.

IT HAD been ten years since the altepetl of Mexico had been conquered and the weapons of war had been laid down, and peace reigned in the altepetl all around; likewise the faith, the recognition of the giver of life, the true deity, God, had begun to flower and bloom. Right in the year of 1531, just a few days into the month of December, there was a humble commoner, a poor ordinary person, whose name was Juan Diego. They say his home was in Cuauhtitlan, but in spiritual matters everything still belonged to Tlatelolco. It was Saturday, still very early in the morning, and he was on his way to attend to divine things and to his errands. When he came close to the hill at the place called Tepeyacac, it was getting light. He heard singing on top of the hill, like the songs of various precious birds. Their voices were [swelling and fading?], and it was as if the hill kept on answering them. Their song was very agreeable and pleasing indeed, entirely surpassing how the bell bird, the trogon, and the other precious birds sing. Juan Diego stopped to look, saying to himself, "Am I so fortunate or deserving as to hear this? Am I just dreaming it? Am I imagining it in sleepwalking? Where am I? Where do I find myself? Is it in the land of the flowers, the land of plentiful crops, the place of which our ancient forefathers used to speak? Is this the land of heaven?"

He stood looking toward the top of the hill to the east, from where the heavenly, precious song was coming. When the song had subsided and silence fell, he heard himself being called from the top of the hill. A woman said to him, "Dear Juan, dear Juan Diego." Thereupon he stepped forward to go

where he was summoned. His heart was not troubled, nor was he startled by anything; rather he was very happy and felt fine as he went climbing the hill, heading toward where he was summoned.

When he reached the top of the hill, he saw a lady standing there; she called to him to go over next to her. When he came before her, he greatly marveled at how she completely surpassed everything in her total splendor. Her clothes were like the sun in the way they gleamed and shone. Her resplendence struck the stones and boulders by which she stood so that they seemed like precious emeralds and jeweled bracelets. The ground sparkled like a rainbow, and the mesquite, the prickly pear cactus, and other various kinds of weeds that grow there seemed like green obsidian, and their foliage like fine turquoise. Their stalks, their thorns and spines gleamed like gold.

He prostrated himself before her and heard her very pleasing and courtly message, as if inviting and flattering him, saying to him, "Do listen, my youngest child, dear Juan, where is it that you are going?" He answered her, "My patron, noble lady, my daughter, I am going to your home of Mexico-Tlatelolco. I am pursuing the divine matters that the representatives of the lord our Lord, our friars, give and teach us."

Thereupon she conversed with him, revealing to him her precious wish. She said to him,

Know, rest assured, my youngest child, that I am the eternally consummate virgin Saint Mary, mother of the very true deity, God, the giver of life, the creator of people, the ever present, the lord of heaven and earth. I greatly wish and desire that they build my temple for me here, where I will manifest, make known, and give to people all my love, compassion, aid, and protection. For I am the compassionate mother of you and of all you people here in this land, and of the other various peoples who love me, who cry out to me, who seek me, who trust in me. There I will listen to their weeping and their sorrows in order to remedy and heal all their various afflictions, miseries, and torments. And in order that this my act of compassion which I am contemplating may come to pass, go to the bishop's palace in Mexico and tell him how I am sending you to put before him how I very much wish that he build me a house, that he erect a temple for me on the level ground here. You are to relate every single thing that you have seen and beheld, and what you have heard. And rest assured that I will be very grateful for it, and I will reward it, for I will enrich you and make you content for it. You will attain many things as my repayment for your efforts and labors with which you go to put in motion what I send you for. And so, my youngest child, you have heard my message. Get on your way, make every effort.

Thereupon he prostrated himself before her, saying to her, "My patron, O Lady, now I am going to carry out your message. Let me, your humble subject, take leave of you for a while." Thereupon he came back down in order to go carry out his errand, coming to take the causeway that comes directly to Mexico.

WHEN HE got inside the altepetl, he went straight to the palace of the bishop, whose name was don fray Juan de Zumarraga, a friar of Saint Francis and the very first priestly ruler to come. As soon as he arrived, he attempted to see him; he implored his servants and dependents to go tell him. After a rather long time they came to tell him that the lord bishop had given orders for him to enter. When he came in, he knelt and bowed low before him. Then he put before him and told him the heavenly Lady's message, his errand. He also told him everything that he had beheld, what he had seen and heard. But when he [the bishop] had heard his whole statement and message, he did not seem to be completely convinced. He answered him, telling him, "My child, do come again, and I will hear you at length. First I will thoroughly look into and consider what you have come about, your wish and desire." He came back out grieving, because his errand was not then carried out.

HE CAME BACK right away, on the very same day. He came straight to the top of the hill and found the heavenly Lady in the same place where he first saw her, waiting for him. When he saw her, he bowed low before her and threw himself to the ground, saying to her:

My patron, O personage, Lady, my youngest child, my daughter, I went to where you sent me, I went to carry out your instructions. Although it was difficult for me to enter the quarters of the priestly ruler, I did see him, and I put before him your message as you ordered me to. He received me kindly and heard it out, but when he answered me, he did not seem to be satisfied or convinced. He told me, "You are to come again, and I will hear you at leisure. First I will thoroughly look into what you have come about, your wish and desire." I could easily see from how he answered me that he thought that perhaps I was just making it up that you want them to build your temple there for you and that perhaps it is not by your order. I greatly implore you, my patron, noble Lady, my daughter, entrust one of the high nobles, who are recognized, respected, and honored, to carry and take your message, so that he will be believed. For I am a poor ordinary man, I carry burdens with the tumpline and carrying frame, I am one of the common people, one who is governed. Where you are sending me is not my usual place, my daughter, my youngest child, O personage, O Lady. Pardon me if I cause you concern, if I incur or bring upon myself your frown or your wrath, O personage, O my Lady.

The revered consummate Virgin answered him,

Do listen, my youngest child. Be assured that my servants and messengers to whom I entrust it to carry my message and realize my wishes are not high ranking people. Rather it is highly necessary that you yourself be involved and take care of it. It is very much by your hand that my will and wish are to be carried out and accomplished. I strongly implore you, my youngest child, and I give you strict orders that tomorrow you be sure to go see the bishop once again. Instruct him on my behalf, make him fully understand my will and wish, so that he will carry out the building of my temple that I am asking him for. And be sure to tell him again how it is really myself, the ever Virgin Saint Mary, the mother of God the deity, who is sending you there.

Juan Diego answered her, saying to her,

My patron, O Lady, my daughter, let me not cause you concern, for with all my heart I will go there and carry out your message. I will not abandon it under any circumstances; although I find the road painful, I will go to do your will. The only thing is that I may not be heard out, or when I have been heard I may not be believed. However, tomorrow, late in the afternoon, when the sun is going down, I will come returning whatever answer the priestly ruler should give me to your message. Now, my youngest child, my daughter, O personage, O Lady, I am taking leave of you; meanwhile, take your rest.

Thereupon he went home to rest.

ON THE FOLLOWING day, Sunday, while it was still very early in the morning and dark everywhere, he left his home and came directly to Tlatelolco to learn divine things and to be counted and also to see the priestly ruler. It was perhaps ten o'clock when they were finished with hearing mass and taking the count, and all the commoners dispersed again. Thereupon Juan Diego went to the palace of the lord bishop; when he got there, he made every effort to see him, but it was with great difficulty that he saw him again. He knelt down at his feet, and he wept and grieved as he told and put before him the message of the heavenly Lady, because he wondered if perhaps the consummate Virgin's message and will that they were to build and erect a temple for her where she designated and wanted it would not be believed. The lord bishop asked and interrogated him about very many things in order to be satisfied about where he saw her and what she was like, and he told it absolutely all to the lord bishop. Although he told him the exact truth about how she was and all that he had seen and beheld, and that she really seemed to be the consummate Virgin, the precious, revered mother of our redeemer, our lord

Jesus Christ, still he was not immediately convinced. He said that it was not by his [Juan Diego's] word and request alone that what he asked for would be done and carried out. Some additional sign was still very much needed so that it could be believed that it was really the heavenly Lady herself who sent him. When Juan Diego heard that, he said to the bishop, "O personage, O ruler, consider what kind of sign it is to be that you request of her, and then I will go ask it of the heavenly Lady who sent me here." And when the bishop saw that he was entirely convinced, that he had absolutely no second thoughts or doubts, he thereupon sent him off.

And when he was on his way, thereupon he [the bishop] ordered some of the people of his household in whom he had full confidence to follow after him and keep close watch where he went, whom he saw, and whom he talked to. But it so happened that thereupon Juan Diego came straight along the causeway, and those who came following him lost sight of him at the place where the ravine comes out near Tepeyacac, next to the wooden bridge. Thought they kept searching everywhere, nowhere did they see him; they returned empty-handed. Not only did they go away vexed because of the loss of time, but it frustrated them and made them angry. They went to tell the lord bishop about it, preparing him not to believe him; they told him that he was only lying to him, only making up what he came to tell him, or that perhaps he only dreamed or saw in sleep walking what he told him and asked of him. They insisted that if he should come again, should return, they would seize him on the spot and punish him severely, so that he would never lie and disturb people again.

ON THE FOLLOWING day, Monday, Juan Diego did not return when he was supposed to take some sign in order to be believed, because when he reached the home of an uncle of his, whose name was Juan Bernardino, a sickness had come upon him [the uncle] and he lay gravely ill. First he went to summon a physician for him, who looked after him for a while, but it was too late; he was already mortally ill. When night had come his uncle asked him that while it was still very early in the morning and dark everywhere, he should come to Tlatelolco to summon one of the friars to go hear his confession and prepare him, because he was fully convinced that it was now time for him to die and that he would not rise again or recover.

IT WAS TUESDAY, still very dark everywhere, when Juan Diego left his home to summon a friar in Tlatelolco. When he came by the hill of Tepeyacac, at the foot of which the road that he took previously passes to the west, he said, "If I just go straight along the road, I am afraid that the Lady may see me, for before you know it she will detain me in order that I should carry the sign to the priestly ruler as she instructed me. May our affliction leave us first; let me first hurry to summon the friar. My uncle is in need and he can't just lie

waiting for him." Thereupon he went around the hill, climbing through an opening and coming out on the other side to the east, so that he would quickly reach Mexico and the heavenly Lady would not detain him. He believed that if he went around there, she who sees absolutely everywhere would not be able to see him. He saw her coming down from the hill where she was watching, where he had seen her before. She came to meet and intercept him on the hillside, saying to him, "Well, my youngest child, where are you going? Where are you headed?" And wasn't he a bit bothered by it? Or ashamed? Or startled and frightened by it? He prostrated himself before her, greeted her, and said to her,

My daughter, my youngest child, Lady, may you be content. How did you feel on awakening? Is your precious body in good health, my patron, my very noble lady? I am going to cause you concern. You must know, my daughter, that a poor subject of yours, my uncle, lies very gravely ill. A great illness has come upon him, of which he will soon die. And first I am hurrying to your home of Mexico to summon one of those beloved of our Lord, our friars, to go hear his confession and prepare him, for what we were born for is to come to await our duty of death. When I have carried this out, then I will return here again so that I may go to carry your message, O personage, my daughter. Please forgive me and meanwhile have patience with me. I am not doing it on purpose, my youngest child, my very noble Lady. I will come by quickly tomorrow.

When she had heard Juan Diego's words, the compassionate, consummate Virgin answered him,

Understand, rest very much assured, my youngest child, that nothing whatever should frighten you or worry you. Do not be concerned, do not fear the illness, or any other illness or calamity. Am I, your mother, not here? Are you not under my protective shade, my shadow? Am I not your happiness? Are you not in the security of my lapfold, in my carrying gear? Do you need something more? Do not let anything worry you or upset you further. Do not let your uncle's illness worry you, for he will not die of what he now has. Rest assured, for he has already recovered.

(And at that very moment his uncle recovered, as was learned afterwards.)

When Juan Diego heard the heavenly lady's message, he was greatly consoled and reassured by it. He implored her to send him to go see the lord bishop, taking him some sign or proof, so that he would believe him. Thereupon the heavenly Lady directed him to go up to the top of the hill where he had seen her before. She said to him, "Go up, my youngest child, to the top

of the hill, and where you saw me and I spoke to you, you will see various kinds of flowers growing. Pick them, gather them, collect them, and then bring them back down here, bring them to me."

Then Juan Diego climbed the hill. When he reached the top, he was greatly astonished at all the different kinds of precious Spanish flowers that were growing there, blossoming and blooming, although their blooming time had not yet come, for it was right then that the frost was strong. They were very fragrant, and the night dew on them was like precious pearls. He thereupon began to pick them; he gathered every one and put them in his lapfold. But the top of the hill was absolutely no place for any flowers to grow, for it was a place of crags, thorns, brambles, cactus, and mesquite, and if some little grassy weeds should grow there at that time, in the month of December, the frost would devour and destroy them all. Then he came back down, bringing to the heavenly Lady the various kinds of flowers that he had gone to pick.

When she saw him, she took them in her arms; then she put them back in the folds of his cloak, saying to him,

My youngest child, these various kinds of flowers are the proof and the sign that you are to take to the bishop. You are to tell him on my behalf that thereby he should see my will and carry out my wish and my will, and that you, my messenger, are very trustworthy. I give you very strict orders to unfold your cloak only before the bishop and show him what you are carrying. You are to recount absolutely everything to him and tell him how I instructed you to climb to the top of the hill to pick the flowers, and everything that you saw and beheld, so that you may really inspire the priestly ruler to see to it immediately that my temple which I requested of him is built and raised.

When the heavenly Lady had given him the various instructions, he came following the causeway that leads directly here to Mexico. Now he came content, confident that it would turn out well, that he would carry it off. As he came he exercised great care with what he had in his lapfold, lest he drop anything, and he enjoyed the fragrance of the various kinds of precious flowers.

WHEN HE CAME to the bishop's palace, the majordomo and other dependents of the priestly ruler went out to meet him, and he asked them to tell him that he wished to see him. But none of them wanted to; they pretended not to hear him, perhaps because it was still very early in the morning or perhaps because they now recognized him, that he would just annoy them with his

hanging around in front of them; their friends who lost him when they were following after him had already cautioned them.

He was waiting for a reply for a very long time. When they saw that he had stood there for a very long time with his head down, that he was doing nothing in case he was called, and it seemed as if he came carrying something that he was keeping in his lapfold, they approached him to see what he came carrying, to satisfy their curiosity. And when Juan Diego saw that he could by no means hide from them what he came carrying and that because of it they would pester him, shove him, or maybe beat him, he showed them by a little glimpse that it was flowers. When they saw that there were all different kinds of Spanish flowers and that they were not in season at that time, they marveled greatly at it and at how very fresh they were, like just opened flowers, pleasant to smell, splendid. They wanted to seize a few of them and take them from him. But all three times when they tried to step forward to take them, they were entirely unsuccessful, because when they were about to grasp them, it was no longer real flowers that they saw but something seemingly painted, embroidered, or sewn on the cloak.

Thereupon they went to tell the lord bishop what they had seen and how the humble commoner who had come several times was wanting to see him and that now he had been waiting there for a very long time for word about his wanting to see him. When the lord bishop heard this, it came to him that it was the proof that would convince him to carry out what the humble person was after. Then he gave orders that he should enter immediately and that he would see him.

And when he entered, he prostrated himself before him, as he had done before, and again he told him all that he had seen and beheld and his mission. He said to him:

My lord ruler, now I have done and carried out what you ordered me. Indeed I went to tell the lady my patron, the heavenly Lady, Saint Mary, the precious mother of God the deity, that you asked for a sign so that you can believe me and build her temple for her in the place where she asks you to erect it. I assured her that I gave you my word that I would bring back to you some sign and verification of her wish, since you left it in my hands. She approved your message, and she gladly accepted your request for some sign, some verification of it, so that her will may be performed and carried out. Well then, today, while it was still very early in the morning, she instructed me to come to see you again. I asked her for some sign of it so that I would be believed, as she said that she would give me [one], and right then she carried it out.

She sent me to the top of the hill where I had seen her before to go cut various kinds of Spanish flowers. When I had cut them, I brought them back to her down there below. She took them in her arms, then put them back in

the folds of my cloak in order that I might bring them back to you and give them to you in person. Although I fully realized that the top of the hill is not a place where flowers grow, that it is only a place of crags, thorns, brambles, cactus, and mesquite, I did not for that reason have any doubts.

When I reached the top of the hill and looked about, it was a flower garden, full of all different kinds of fine flowers in the Spanish style, glistening with dew, so that I immediately went to pick them. And she told me that I was to give them to you on her behalf. Thus I am carrying it out, so that in them you may see what you request as a sign to carry out her wish, and it will be seen that my message and my errand are true. Here they are, please accept them.

Thereupon he spread out his white cloak, in the folds of which he was carrying the flowers, and as all the different kinds of Spanish flowers scattered to the ground, the precious image of the consummate Virgin Saint Mary, mother of God the deity, was imprinted and appeared on the cloak, just as it is today where it is kept in her precious home, her temple of Tepeyacac, called Guadalupe.

When the lord bishop and all who were there saw it, they knelt down, they marveled greatly at it, they looked at it transfixed, they grieved, their hearts were afflicted; it was as if their spirits and their minds were transported upward. The lord bishop, with tears and sorrow, implored and asked her forgiveness for not having immediately carried out her wish, her message.

When he arose, he loosened the garment which was tied around Juan Diego's neck, his cloak, on which the heavenly Lady had appeared, on which she had imprinted herself. Thereupon he took it to place it in his oratory.

Juan Diego stayed one more day in the bishop's palace, he detained him for a while. The following day he said to him, "Let us go so that you may show people the place where it is the heavenly Lady's wish that they build a temple for her." Thereupon orders were given for it to be built and erected.

After Juan Diego had shown where the heavenly Lady instructed that her temple be erected, he took his leave, because he wanted to go home to see his uncle, Juan Bernardino, who lay gravely ill when he left him behind to summon one of the friars in Tlatelolco to hear his confession and prepare him, and who the heavenly Lady told him had already recovered.

But they did not let him go alone. They accompanied him to his home, and when he arrived they saw that his uncle was now entirely healthy, that nothing whatever ailed him. And he was greatly astonished at how his nephew came accompanied and was rendered great honor, and he asked his nephew how it happened that he was thus greatly honored. He told him how when he left to call the friar to hear his confession and prepare him, the heavenly Lady appeared to him at Tepeyacac and sent him to Mexico to go see the lord

bishop so that he would build her a house in Tepeyacac and how she told him not to worry, since he was already well, by which he had been greatly consoled.

His uncle told him that it was the truth, that she cured him at that very moment, and that he really saw her in exactly the same way as she appeared to his nephew, and that she told him that meanwhile she was sending him [Juan Diego] to Mexico to see the bishop. He [the uncle] was then to go see him too, he was to put absolutely everything before him, he was to inform him of what he had seen and how she had healed him miraculously, and that he was to give her precious image the very name of the consummate Virgin, Saint Mary of Guadalupe, that it was to bear that very name.

Thereupon they brought Juan Bernardino before the lord bishop to inform him and verify it in his presence. The bishop lodged the two of them, him and his nephew Juan Diego, in his palace for quite a few days until such time as the temple of the Queen was erected at Tepeyacac where she appeared to Juan Diego. The lord bishop moved the precious image of the heavenly precious Lady to the cathedral; he removed it from his palace, where it had been in his oratory, so that everyone would see and marvel at her precious image.

There was a movement in all the altepetls everywhere of people coming to see and marvel at her precious image. They came to show their devotion and pray to her; they marveled greatly at how it was by a divine miracle that she had appeared, that absolutely no earthly person had painted her precious image.

Lisa Sousa, C. M. Stafford Poole, and James Lockhart, *Luis Laso de la Vega's The Story of Guadalupe* (Stanford, CA: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1998), English text only, pp. 61–89.

Christian Pageant

Every year, on September 8, in the town of Tepoztlan near Cuernavaca, the Nahuas who live in the area celebrate a feast during which they present the following pageant/play, as they have done since ancient times. The dialogue was recorded and translated by Karttunen and Céspedes.

In the Language of Kings

*An Anthology of Mesoamerican Literature—
Pre-Columbian to the Present*



Miguel León-Portilla and Earl Shorris

with Sylvia S. Shorris, Ascensión H. de León-Portilla, and Jorge Klor de Alva



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Para los tocayos,
Miguel Diego León-Portilla Hernández
y
Michael Laurino Shorris

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